

Aharei Mot-Kedoshim 5786

אחרי מות | קדשים תשפ"ו

## How to Be Holy

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This week, we read two parashiyot from Leviticus: Aharei Mot and Kedoshim. Taken together, they cover five clearly defined topics. Aharei Mot deals with the rituals of the high priest on Yom Kippur; regulations governing the slaughter of animals for food and sacrifice; and the prohibition of various sexual relations, especially incest. This last subject is resumed at the end of Kedoshim. Between the two discussions of sexual relations is the famous Chapter 19, which opens Kedoshim. This chapter stands out from the rest of our double parashah—in fact, from the rest of the book of Leviticus. It is a reprieve from the seemingly endless ritual instructions, most of which are no longer applicable, that make up the bulk of the book; and, though Chapter 19 does include some important ritual instructions, it is mostly devoted to the kind of rules for life that should govern every well-organized society, rules that people of most cultures and religions have tried to inculcate for everyone's benefit.

The chapter begins with a striking heading: "God said to Moses: Speak to the entire assembly of the Israelites and say to them: 'Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.'" The text lends this chapter special weight when it instructs Moses to gather the entire people to hear it, something that does not often occur in Leviticus, which is mostly directed at the priests. Indeed, many of the instructions laid down in Chapter 19 would, if observed, produce a society of very high standards: Respect your parents; leave part of your harvest for the poor and the stranger; do not steal, embezzle, or lie; don't oppress your fellow man; don't delay payment to your employees; don't curse the deaf or trip the blind; don't pervert justice; don't go around bearing tales; don't nurse a grievance, take revenge, or hold a grudge; respect your elders and protect the stranger; don't cheat in business; and, in the middle of the chapter, the ringing and nearly impossible challenge to love your neighbor as yourself.

But the chapter doesn't begin "Be moral, for I the Lord your God am moral" or "Be righteous, for I the Lord your God am righteous." It begins "Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Indeed, everything that surrounds Chapter 19 is about holiness. Our double parashah begins by instructing Aaron not to enter the

most holy precinct of the Tabernacle whenever he chooses but only once a year, under particular conditions and pursuant to particular rites, subject to a penalty of death; it seems that the holy is not only an ideal state to be strived for but a force to be treated with caution. The laws of prohibited sexual relations are tied to holiness, for they are preceded and followed by the admonition: "Make yourselves holy and be holy, for I am the Lord your God" (20:7) and "Be holy for me, for I the Lord your God am holy." Holiness seems to involve both a moral and a ritual state: it is to be pursued, in some cases; and to be avoided—or at least, treated cautiously—in others.

The dangers inherent in holiness are mentioned often in the Torah. The warning to Aaron about not entering the holy site builds on the shocking account of the death of his two sons (Lev. 10) that resulted from their unauthorized entry into the holy place to make an unauthorized offering of incense (Lev. 10:1–7). The Torah does not say that God struck them down; it says that fire emerged from God's presence—i.e., from the sanctuary itself; they were killed by a force that seemed to be triggered automatically, like an electric shock. And to drive the lesson home, God explains their death by stressing its connection with His holiness:

*Through those nearest me will I be shown to be holy,  
And before the people as a whole, I will be shown to be  
glorious. (Lev. 10:3)*

Thus, the Torah commands us to be holy, but it also warns us to beware of the holy.

Our tradition has resolved the tension between the command and the warning by pointing to another meaning of the word kedoshim, the word normally translated "holy." In many passages in the Bible, words that mean "holy" imply separating or distinguishing. Relying on this usage, tradition explains "You shall be holy" (kedoshim tihyu) as meaning "You shall be separate" (perushim tihyu) (e.g. Sifra Kedoshim 1:1). This usage can be observed in the laws of the Sabbath: when we are commanded to

make the Sabbath holy, the meaning is that we are to separate the Sabbath day from weekdays through special observances.

By analogy, when we are told “Be holy, for I, the Lord your God am holy,” the meaning would be that we are commanded to separate ourselves from bad practices, such as the forbidden relations listed twice in our double parashah. The injunction could imply separating ourselves from other nations, in accordance with the heading of Chapter 19: “Do not do the kinds of things that are done in the Land of Egypt where you formerly dwelt, and do not do the kinds of things that are done in the land of Canaan to which I am bringing you.” The injunctions to be holy would imply that, as God is separate and different from the world and everything that is in it, we are expected to be different from the other nations in holding ourselves to a higher standard.

But there is another line of rabbinic interpretation. To be separate, some ancient rabbis explained, means that to be holy, we should separate ourselves, i.e., abstain, even from things that are permitted to us. The law permits us to drink wine, but that does not mean that we have license for drunkenness; the law permits us to have sexual intercourse with our spouses, but should practice it in moderation; the law does not explicitly forbid foul language, but we should avoid it out of our own sense of holiness. (e.g., Ramban) The Pharisees of antiquity were a sect of Jews who adopted stricter rules of ritual purity and obligatory gifts to the priests and Levites than those observed by most Jews. Tradition explains the name of the sect as deriving from *parush*, “separate,” the very word that the Rabbis used to explain *kadosh*, “holy.”

Pushed a little further, this idea of holiness could devolve into asceticism. The satisfaction of going the extra mile in serving God, particularly in the form of self-denial, is appealing to a certain religious sensibility and is attested in the history of Jewish religious practice. For spending thirteen years in a cave studying the Torah, the second-century rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai has come to be considered a saint; his tomb in the Galilee is revered to this day. There were pietists in antiquity who observed a second day of Yom Kippur, resulting in a forty-eight-hour fast. Medieval European Jewish pietists imposed upon themselves extreme mortifications that were similar to those of the monks of medieval Christendom. Kabbalists since the twelfth century have undertaken extreme fasting and periods of isolation from human contact. A person who undertook such restrictions was known in Yiddish as a *póresh*, a “separated one.” Most rabbis historically, while showing respect for persons who went beyond the law’s

minimal demands, have preached moderation. But the ascetic trend in Judaism, though not mainstream, has been continuous.

Not everyone agreed that asceticism was a good thing. The author of Ecclesiastes advocates moderation even in matters of religion, saying, “Do not be overly righteous; why should you make yourself desolate?” Most of us moderns probably incline more to Ecclesiastes’s view than to the views of the ascetics. For it is not only themselves that the too-holy make miserable by choosing to miss out on so many of life’s healthy and permissible pleasures. We have all observed the tendency of the too-holy to take pride in their piety and to look down on the rest of us, even on those who strive to be merely holy. There is even an English word for the smug too-holy: sanctimonious, derived from the Latin word for holy, *sanctus*. They are a social type from which the rest of us are happy to be separated! Perhaps it was these extremists to whom Hillel addressed his admonition, “Do not separate [tifrosh] yourself from the community” (M. Avot 2:4).

But the holiness that is enjoined on us cannot simply be an avoidance. God’s holiness radiates outward, so can the holiness that He expects of us be merely a turning away? God’s holiness is a positive; can ours be merely a negative? We are commanded not merely to avoid something but to do something. Our chapter’s injunctions to love one another and to love the stranger must be a start in the direction of holiness. But the danger that radiates from the holy suggests that something more than mere obedience, more than even fastidious obedience, more even than love is implied in the command to be holy.

God’s holiness is surely not merely a set of restrictions and requirements but the power that created and sustains the universe and that has the capacity to bring it crashing down. We cannot achieve that kind of power, of course—and woe betide the one who thinks he can! But insofar as it is compatible with our powers as human beings and the capacity of social institutions to tolerate it, we are to emulate this force by living actively, engaging positively and intensively in whatever we do, however we live, whatever choices we make.

*This commentary was originally published in 2018.*